

Responding to a disclosure of child sexual abuse

What is this resource about?

This resource provides clear, stepped guidance on how to respond to a disclosure of child sexual abuse. Its purpose is to provide an easily accessible reference on how to respond to a child who discloses sexual abuse. The guidance is relevant whether the disclosure is about abuse that is current or that occurred in the past. It is not intended to replace organisational or statutory policies, procedures, or frameworks that a practitioner may be working within.

This information has been collated from the websites of government child protection departments across the jurisdictions of Australia. It also includes the expert views of practitioners and researchers in the field.

Who is this resource for?

This resource is for any adult who works with children including, but not limited to, practitioners working for a social or community service, private practitioners, school counsellors, GPs, and other health professionals.

How to respond to a disclosure: the 'SAFER' steps

Before considering how to respond to a disclosure of sexual abuse, it's important to acknowledge that it can be incredibly difficult for children to summon the courage to tell an adult about being abused, due to secrecy, shame, and fear of not being believed. They may communicate the abuse in a direct or an indirect way.

If a child tells you that they are being sexually abused it is important to follow the five 'SAFER' steps:



The five SAFER steps in detail



Stay calm

- Be mindful of your own emotional reactions and stay calm.
- Use your tone of voice and facial expressions to convey a sense of safety and support to the child.
- If possible, find a private place to talk.
- Give the child your full attention and allow them the time they need to tell their story in their own way.
- The most important thing you can do to help the child feel safer is by reassuring them that:
 - » you believe them
 - » they did the right thing in telling you
 - » they are not to blame for what happened
 - » you want to help them, and
 - » they can trust you.



Ask open questions

- Asking questions may be necessary to understand and clarify what the child is trying to say so you can begin to consider next steps.
- Do not ask directly using the term 'sexual abuse'. This could be frightening for a child who has been threatened and silenced by the perpetrator.
- Ask a few gentle open-ended questions such as:
 - » 'Has anything happened that has made you feel hurt or unsafe?'
 - » 'Can you tell me more about that?'
 - » 'What else happened?'
 - » 'How often does it happen?'
- Questions that are closed (i.e., that invite one-word answers) or too specific are not helpful. Specific questioning can potentially jeopardise information that would be used in court. It's not the role of a first responder to gather evidence; this is the role of child protection and police services.
- Be mindful not to ask too many questions as this could be overwhelming and intimidating for a child.
- Don't pressure the child to give more information than they want to. There does not need to be a full disclosure to make a notification and if necessary, you can discuss concerns with child protection services without making a formal report.



Focus on safety

- Explore the child's immediate and ongoing safety including current and ongoing contact with the alleged perpetrator.
- This information will need to be reported and will assist decision making about responding to the disclosure of abuse.
- Where appropriate, help the child identify ways of staying safe, e.g. not being alone with perpetrator.



Explain next steps

- The child may be fearful about what will happen to them or to their family as a result of disclosing. Being transparent about what you will do next can help alleviate fear and helps them know what to expect.
- Let them know you want to protect them and will need to tell another adult (police or child protection) who will be able to help. Outside of notifying the authorities, only reveal the disclosure to others where it's completely necessary.
- A child should be told a report is being made in a way that is appropriate for their age and capacity to understand.
- If they ask you a question that you can't answer, tell them that you don't know but you will talk to the right people who can help.
- Don't make promises you can't keep, e.g. some children may want you to keep the abuse secret, but this promise should not be made. Instead, you could say something like 'I can't make that promise but I will do my best to keep you safe'.
- Let them know that you are there for them if they need to talk and they can ask you about what will happen next as often as they need to. You can also help the child to identify other people they can talk to.



Report

- Write down what the child told you using their exact words, noting the date and time.
- Record what you noticed about the child's mood and behaviour, and any information about physical symptoms or injuries.
- If you work for an organisation, it will be important to follow your organisation's protocols for note taking and record keeping. It will also be important to follow specific protocols for reporting child protection concerns.
- Keep information confidential.
- If there are no protocols, or you do not work for an organisation, report the incident to child protection services in your state or territory.
- Up-to-date contact details for the statutory child protection departments across Australian jurisdictions can be found on the CFCA website [here](#).

Responding when you are concerned but a child has not disclosed

If you suspect a child is being sexually groomed and/or harmed but they have not disclosed abuse to you, the SAFER steps and practices can still support you in responding to this situation. This [tip sheet from Bravehearts](#) shares indicators of child sexual abuse that may be helpful in identifying potential red flags.

A word on the legal implications of child sexual abuse disclosure

Often practitioners have concerns not only about how to respond to disclosures of sexual abuse but also the legal implications of a disclosure. This resource does not address the legal aspects, it's intended as a guide on how to respond in the moment to a disclosure conversation.

If you have questions or concerns about the legal aspect of child sexual abuse and what the implications are of receiving a disclosure, we strongly encourage you to engage in your own research and become informed about this.

These are some questions you might like to research:

- What are the mandatory reporting requirements in your state or territory? The CFCA's Resource Sheet on mandatory reporting is a helpful and continually updated reference point. You can access it [here](#).
- What are your organisation's policies and procedures about note taking? How does this relate to privacy policies?
- What are your organisation's policies and procedures about continuing to work with a child when they are the subject of investigation or current legal proceedings?
- Make it your business to find these things out as a part of a commitment to children's safety. Even if your organisation or industry is not a mandated reporter, we all have a role to play in keeping children and young people safe from harm and should report any concerns or disclosures to those who are in a position to investigate further.
- You might like to consider working together with members of your team to gain clarity on these issues or speaking to your supervisor. Being clear about these things in your service can provide a solid foundation for responding well to disclosures.

Key websites

ACT

Department of Community Services:
<https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocyfs/children/child-and-youth-protection-services>

New South Wales

Department of Communities and Justice:
<https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/providers/children-families/child-protection-services>

Northern Territory

Northern Territory Government: <https://nt.gov.au/community/child-protection-and-care/child-abuse>

Queensland

Department of Child Safety, Youth, and Women:
<https://www.csyw.qld.gov.au/child-family/protecting-children>

South Australia

Department for Child Protection:
<https://www.childprotection.sa.gov.au/>

Tasmania

Department of Communities:
https://www.communities.tas.gov.au/children/child_protection_services

Victoria

Department of Health & Human Services:
<https://services.dhhs.vic.gov.au/child-protection>

Western Australia

Department of Communities, Child Protection, and Family Support: <https://www.dcp.wa.gov.au/Pages/Home.aspx>

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Related Emerging Minds resources

Practice paper: [Making use of practitioners' skills to support a child who has been sexually abuse](#)

Podcast: [Responding to the challenge of child sexual abuse](#)

